Digital Etiquette (from Sharmila Murthy's Property I course)

Phones, etc.: This should go without saying, but let's say it anyway: you should turn off your cellphone and/or other devices (iPods, etc.) before you enter the classroom. If your phone rings once during class this semester, we'll all laugh and I'll ask you to turn it off. If your phone rings again during class this semester, we'll need to have a talk. I understand that your phones connect you with your friends and family, but the classroom should be a place apart, however briefly, from the outside world. You will learn more, in short, if you can concentrate on the course while you're in the course. Your smart phone should only be used at designated times, such as when we are conducting class polls using 'clickers'.

Laptops/Tablets: You may use a laptop or tablet computer to take notes during this class. Indeed, there will be times when I will call on students with laptops/tablets to look up things during class. However, in-class laptops/tablets also present temptations that many students find irresistible. **You should not use a laptop/tablet during class to follow a game, check your friends' statuses on Facebook, shop online, IM, respond to email, etc.** Such activities not only distract you (meaning you will be less able to participate meaningfully in the class' conversations), they also distract anyone around or behind you. If you often seem distracted by what's on your screen, I will ask you to put your laptop/tablet away. **Failure to abide by this policy will make you ineligible for the participation-related half-step increase in your grade at the end of the semester.**

The Myth of Multi-Tasking with Technology: Research suggests that you should not use your electronic devices to check Facebook, respond to email, shop online or do anything except take notes because this type of multi-tasking will not help you learn. According to one study that examined the nature of in-class laptop use in a large lecture course:

> Results showed that students who used laptops in class spent considerable time multitasking and that the laptop use posed a significant distraction to both users and fellow students. Most importantly, the level of laptop use was negatively related to several measures of student learning, including self-reported understanding of course material and overall course performance. [1]

Another study investigated the effects of multi-tasking by testing two groups of students who heard the exact same lecture:

> One group of students was allowed to use their laptops to engage in browsing, search, and/or social computing behaviors during the lecture. Students in the second condition were asked to keep their laptops closed for the duration of the lecture. Students in the open laptop condition suffered decrements on traditional measures of memory for lecture content. [2]

In addition, as noted in a *New York Times* article:

> Scientists say juggling e-mail, phone calls and other incoming information can change how people think and behave. They say our ability to focus is being undermined by bursts of information.

> These play to a primitive impulse to respond to immediate opportunities and threats. The stimulation provokes excitement — a dopamine squirt — that researchers say can be addictive. In its absence, people feel bored.

> While many people say multitasking makes them more productive, research shows otherwise. Heavy multitaskers actually have more trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information, scientists say, and they experience more stress.

> And scientists are discovering that even after the multitasking ends, fractured thinking and lack of focus persist. In other words, this is also your brain off computers. [3]

In short, technology is wonderful because it often enables us to lead more efficient and enjoyable lives. However, we need to be mindful of the hazards of being constantly 'plugged in.' So while you are welcome to use your laptop/tablet in class, resist the urge to do anything except take notes – for your sake and for the sake of your classmates who will no doubt be distracted by what you do. I ask for your help in monitoring the use of laptops/tablets in the classroom. And remember that hidden behind all the hype about multi-tasking is a sad truth: it can actually make you slower and dumber!

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[1] Carrie B. Fried, *In-class laptop use and its effects on student learning*, 50 COMPUT. EDUC. 906–914 (2008).

[2] Helene Hembrooke & Geri Gay, *The laptop and the lecture: The effects of multitasking in learning environments*, 15 J. COMPUT. HIGH. EDUC. 46–64 (2003).

[3] Matt Richtel, *Attached to Technology and Paying a Price*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, June 6, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html.